

455

ADDRESS

PREPARED BY

Mr. Booker T. Washington

FOR DELIVERY

AT

A DINNER GIVEN BY THE MEMBERS OF

THE UNION LEAGUE CLUB

ON

February 12, 1899

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE BIRTH

OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ADDRESS

PREPARED BY

Mr. Booker T. Washington

FOR DELIVERY

AT

A DINNER GIVEN BY THE MEMBERS OF
THE UNION LEAGUE CLUB

ON

February 12, 1899

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE BIRTH

OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from

The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

ADDRESS.*



Gentlemen :

You ask one whom the Great Emancipator found a piece of property and left an American citizen to speak of Abraham Lincoln. My first acquaintance with our hero and benefactor is this: Night after night, before the dawn of day, on an old slave plantation in Virginia, I recall the form of my sainted mother, bending over a batch of rags that enveloped my body, on a dirt floor, breathing a fervent prayer to Heaven that "Marsa Lincoln" might succeed, and that one day she and I might be free; and so, on your invitation, I

* This address was not delivered at the Lincoln Dinner, given by members of the Union League Club on February 12, 1899, owing to the detention of Mr. Washington between New York and Philadelphia in a snow-bound train. It was, however, made two evenings afterward at a public reception extended to Mr. Washington by Mr. Henry C. Davis at his residence, 902 Spruce Street, Philadelphia.

Mr. Washington is one of the foremost men of the colored race in America, and it has been deemed a matter of courtesy to him, and of general public interest, that his views, as prepared for presentation upon a great commemorative occasion in the Union League, should be distributed to its members.

come here to-night to celebrate with you the answer to those prayers. But be it far from me to revive the bitter memories of the past, nor would I narrow the work of Abraham Lincoln to the black race of this country ; rather would I call him the Emancipator of America—the liberator of the white man North, of the white man South; the one who, in unshackling the chains of the Negro, has turned loose the enslaved forces of nature in the South, and has knit all sections of our country together by the indissoluble bonds of commerce. To the man in the North who cherished hatred against the South, Lincoln brought freedom. To the white man who landed at Jamestown years ago, with hopes as bright and prospects as cheering as those who stepped ashore on Plymouth Rock, Lincoln, for the first time, gave an opportunity to breathe the air of unfettered freedom—a freedom from dependence on others' labor to the independence of self-labor ; freedom to transform unused and dwarfed hands into skilled and productive hands ; to change labor from drudgery into that which is dignified and glorified ; to change local commerce into trade with the world ; to change the Negro from an ignorant man into an intelligent man ; to change sympathies that were local and narrow into love and good-will for all mankind ; freedom to change stagnation into growth, weakness into power ; yea, to us all, your race and mine, Lincoln has been a great emancipator. Even the

treasures of nature in our Southland, that seemed to hide themselves from the hand of man, have felt the inspiring hand of freedom ; and coal and iron and marble have leaped forth, and where there was once the overseer's lash, steam and electricity make go the shop, the factory, and the furnace.

But all is not done, and it remains for us, the living, to finish the work that Lincoln left uncompleted. You of the great and prosperous North still owe a serious and uncompleted duty to your less fortunate brothers of the white race South, who suffered and are still suffering the consequence of American slavery. What was the task you asked them to perform? Returning to their destitute homes after years of war, to face blasted hopes, devastation, a shattered industrial system, you ask them to add to their burdens that of preparing in education, politics, and economics, in a few short years, for citizenship, four or five millions of former slaves. That the South, staggering under the burden, made blunders, that in some measure there has been disappointment, no one need be surprised.

The four million slaves that Lincoln freed are now nearly ten million freemen. That which was three hundred years in doing can hardly be undone in thirty years. How can you help the South and the Negro in the completion of Lincoln's work? A large majority of the people Lincoln freed are still ignorant,

without proper food, or property, or skill, or correct habits—are without the requisites for intelligent and independent citizenship. The mere fiat of law could not make a dependent man independent; it could not make an ignorant voter an intelligent voter; it could not make one man respect another man. These results come by beginning at the bottom and working upward; by recognizing our weakness as well as our strength; by tangible evidences of our worthiness to occupy the highest positions. Unfortunately, too many of my people, because of ignorance, began at the top instead of the bottom; grasped for the shadow instead of the substance. I come to your State and say the German is ignorant; you point to the best paying truck-farm, operated by a German. I say the German is without skill; you point to the largest machine-shop in your city, owned and operated by a German. I say the German is lazy; you point to the most magnificent dwelling on your avenue, that is the result of the savings of the German, who began in poverty. I say the German can not be trusted; you point to the German who is the president of the largest bank. I say the German is not fitted for citizenship; you point me to the German who is the chief executive of your magnificent city—these are the kind of arguments that kill prejudice by the acre. When you come to Alabama and ask has the Negro executive ability, I want to show you, as I can at

Tuskegee, Alabama, an institution of learning, originated and controlled by Negroes, where there are more than 1000 students, 88 officers, 26 industries, 42 buildings, 2267 acres of land, \$300,000 worth of property. When you ask has the Negro mechanical skill, I want to show you the finest house in a county, planned and constructed by a Negro. When you ask is the Negro lazy, I want to show you the finest farm, owned and operated by a Negro. When you ask is the Negro honest, I want to show you a Negro whose note is acceptable at the bank for \$5000. When you ask is the Negro economical, I want to show you a Negro with \$50,000 in the bank. When you ask is the Negro fit for citizenship, I want to show you a Negro paying taxes on a cotton factory. I want to show you Negroes who stand at the front in the affairs of State, religion, education, mechanics, commerce, and household economy. "By this sign we shall conquer." By this method we shall so knit our civil and business interests into that of the white man's, that when he prospers we shall prosper; when we fail, he fails. By this method we shall crawl up, pull up, or burst up.

Yes, in answer to your proclamation, Father Abraham, we are coming, ten million strong—we are coming by the way of the college, by the way of agriculture, the shop, the factory, the trades, the household arts. With this foundation, if God is right and the

Bible is true, there is no power that can permanently stay our progress.

You can not graft a fifteenth century civilization into a twentieth century civilization by the mere performance of mental gymnastics. You can not convert a man by abusing him. The mere pushing of knowledge into the heads of a people, without providing a medium through the hands for its use, is not always wise. The educated man is more dangerous than the ignorant, idle man. An educated man standing on the corners of your streets with his hands in his pockets is not one whit more benefit to society than an ignorant man in the streets with his hands in his pockets. It is only as the black man produces something that makes the markets of the world dependent on him for something, will he secure his rightful place.

Eight years ago I could have shown you a colored community in Alabama that was in debt, mortgaging crops; living from hand to mouth on rented land; paying fifteen to forty per cent. interest on advances for food; school lasting three months, taught in a wreck of a log cabin; people of all ages and sexes huddled together, often to the number of six or eight in one room, and without habits of thrift or economy. A little more than a dozen years ago, four teachers—one a carpenter and blacksmith, one trained in agriculture, one in cookery, another in sewing, combined with literary education—went to this community. Go with

me to that community to-day, and I will show you a large modern school-house, with school lasting eight months ; farms well cultivated and owned by colored people, who live in homes with two or three rooms. I will show you a people almost free from debt, and a gin, and a store, and a wheelwright and a blacksmith shop operated by Negroes ; a community that has been revolutionized in religion, education, and industry. Let us multiply these communities in every part of the South. By this way we are coming ; by this way we are proving ourselves worthy of the confidence of our great emancipator. We mean to prove our worth,—not by mere talk or complaints of, or fault-finding,—and the rest, in a large measure, we leave with you.

And, may I say, you do well to keep the name of Abraham Lincoln permanently linked with the highest interests of the Negro race. His was the hand, the brain, and the conscience that gave us the first opportunity to make the attempt to be men instead of property. What Lincoln so nobly began, the philanthropy and wealth of this nation, aided by our own efforts, should complete. The character of the father who has a half dozen children is determined by the manner that he treats all of those children. He may rear with care and love five of them, yet the neglect, the abandonment of one will serve to blight his standing with his neighbors. The character of this nation will very largely be judged by the help and encour-

agement which it renders to the ten millions of Negroes who constitute so large a proportion of the American family. So long as these people are down, so long as they are fettered with ignorance, poverty, and lack of opportunity, so long will the reputation and character of the whole nation suffer.

The struggle of Abraham Lincoln up from the lowest poverty and ignorance to the highest usefulness gives hope and inspiration to the Negro. Like Lincoln, he is gathering strength from the very obstacles he is mastering and overcoming. No race in history has ever grown strong and useful except as it has had to battle against tremendous odds; except as it has been tried year by year in a crucible of fire. Like Lincoln, the Negro knows the meaning of the one-room cabin; he knows the bed of rags and hay; he knows what it is to be minus books and school-house; he has tasted the lowliest poverty, but through them all he is making his way to the top. In the effort he is slowly but surely learning that the highest character of citizenship is in the possession of virtue, intelligence, simplicity, the spirit of self-denial, economy, thrift, and the ownership of property; these elements of strength will give him that manhood without which no race can permanently stand, and which no adverse influence can take from him.

One might as well talk of stopping the flow of the Mississippi River as the progress of a race that is

securing property, education, and Christian character.

Let us never forget that we are one people in this country, and that which helps the Negro helps the white man ; and that which hinders the Negro hinders the white man. Show me a Negro who hates a white man on account of his race, and I will show you a weak and undeveloped Negro. Show me a white man who hates a Negro on account of his race, and I will show you a weak and undeveloped white man.

“ The laws of changeless justice bind
Oppressor with oppressed ;
And close as sin and suffering joined
We march to fate abreast.”

No member of your race in any part of this country can harm the weakest or meanest member of my race without the proudest and bluest blood in our civilization being degraded.

Gentlemen, friends of humanity, raise yourselves above yourselves, above race, above party, above everything, if you can ; subserve the highest welfare of ten millions of people, whose interests are permanently interwoven by decree of God with those of sixty millions of yours, and seek with me a way out of this great problem, which hangs over our country like a blighting shadow. Find any method of escape save that of patiently, wisely, bravely, manfully, bringing

the Southern white man and the Negro into closer sympathetic and friendly relations through education, industrial and business development, and that touch of high Christian sympathy which makes the whole world kin—find any way out of our present condition save this, and I am ready to follow where you lead.

It seems to me that the highest duty which the generous and patriotic people of this country owe to themselves and their country is to give willingly the means for the support of such institutions which are, without doubt, solving this serious and perplexing problem. If we had the means of Tuskegee alone we could make our work tell in a hundredfold larger degree in the settlement of this great question. You of the North have, in a large measure, the money for education which is to settle this problem.

No individual or race that makes itself permanently felt in the building-up of the country is long left without proper reward or recognition. The most important problem that is now confronting the Negro and his friends is the turning of the force of his education in the direction that it will contribute most effectively to the betterment of the country and the Negro himself.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I favor the highest and most thorough development of the Negro's mind. No race can accomplish anything until its mind is awakened. But the weak point in

the past has been, in too many cases, that there has been no connection between the Negro's educated brain and the opportunity or manner of earning his daily living. There has been almost no thought of connecting the educated brain with the educated hand.

Industrial education is not meant to teach one to work so much as to teach him how to make the forces of nature—horse-power, steam, and electricity—work for him. It is the ignorant, unskilled man who toils from day to day with his hands, while the man with education and trained hands makes the forces of nature do work for him. The masses of the colored people work hard, but by reason of their want of skill and intelligence, some one else receives the profits. There is little profit in the raising of the raw material that enters into cotton fabrics; the profit comes in the higher forms of manufacturing. By reason of the Negro's lack of skill he is at present at the bottom, so far as the matter of profit-sharing is concerned. At the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama we seek to give such an education as will put the Negro on the upper tier in the matter of production and profit-sharing.

It is said that we will be hewers of wood and drawers of water, but we will be more. We will turn the wood into machinery; into implements of agriculture. We will turn the water into steam; into

dairy and agricultural products, and thus knit our life about that of the white man in a way to make us realize anew that "God made from one blood all people to dwell and prosper on the face of the earth."

